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ABSTRACT

Given the importance of colleges and universities as social institutions, it is surprising that there are few theoretical ideas about how colleges operate or theories of how to implement change. The range of theoretical systems available to measure the college environment varies with the level of analysis, with the person whose environment is being examined (students, professors, or administrators), and with the relationship being examined. Three approaches seem to have unusual promise as bases of theory for understanding the college environment; role theory, organizational psychology, and social ecological analysis. Existing data could be reanalyzed using their concepts to further explore their usefulness. (Author/MSE)

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Theoretical Approaches to the College Environment

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The need for theories of how college environments operate is described. Questions of the unit of analysis and the scope of the variables considered are discussed. Criteria for theories of college environments are proposed, with emphasis on the production of testable theoretical predictions, and the existence of an internal logic. Applying these criteria to various theories, three approaches appear unusually promising: role theory, organizational psychology, and social ecological analysis. The present scope, advantages, limitations, and applicability of each approach is explored. It is suggested that existing data could be analyzed to compare the utility of the theories.

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Theoretical Approaches to the College Environment

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Colleges and universities are complex social institutions. Given their importance, it is surprising that there are few theoretical ideas about how colleges operate or theories of how to implement change. Walsh (1973) has recently reviewed the approaches of several writers on colleges. Although he goes to considerable lengths to show that each approach is based on some theory of person-environment interaction, a close reading suggests that, except for Barton's behavioral setting propositions and Holland's work on the consistency between an individual's vocational preferences and the distribution of preferences in the student body, there are almost no genuine theoretical propositions beyond the vague idea that students are better off if their characteristics are congruent with those of the college. There seems to be a dearth of well developed theoretical ideas of how colleges and universities function. We need theoretical ideas to truly understand the effect of activities on our colleges' environments and to know what to assess and what to do once we have obtained the information. Although there may be the beginnings of ideas in such areas as the social psychology of education, the need for well developed conceptions of how colleges work remains. Although we can make useful decisions without such theoretical underpinnings, they would be much better decisions if they were based on an accurate theoretical understanding of the college environment (Baird, 1974).

What theoretical systems might be useful to understand the college environment and, consequently, serve as the base for meaningful and useful measures of the college environment? There is no simple answer to this question. The range of possible theories varies with the level of analysis and the focal person whose environment we are examining. The range of possible theories which might be applicable vary when we concentrate on the environments of the students, the professors, or the administrators. The possible theories also differ when we concentrate on the person's relations with his or her immediate group, other groups, peripheral members of his or her own group, the organization, the total community, other colleges, and the external society.

It seems obvious that some theories have very limited application to the college environment. For example, traditional psychoanalysis seems to have little application. Likewise behavioristic psychology seems too narrow to encompass the complexity and richness of the college experience. However, related theories do seem to have some possible relevance. For example, the effects of different colleges on students' ego development, based on neo-freudian ideas, have been studied by Sanford (1964) and Chickering (1969). The reinforcement-based ideas of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) have been applied to large social organizations. A great number of other theories, which initially might seem inappropriate, may be useful in modified forms.

How can we decide which theories have the best prospects for providing understanding of the college environment? One possible basis for choice is in the criteria suggested by Walsh (1973). He suggests that the following

criteria be used: comprehensiveness, clarity and explicitness, operational adequacy in measuring man and the environment, inclusion of empirical findings, parsimony, and empirical research generated. These are all helpful criteria, but I would add two which seems to be the sine qua non of theories: the production of testable theoretical predictions and the existence of an internal theoretical logic. As Deutch and Krauss (1965) put it ". . . it is evident that a theory will be fruitful to the extent that it contains constructs that meet the requirements of (1) logical fertility (such constructs enable logical inferences to be made), (2) multiple connections (the constructs are not isolated from one another but, rather, are so richly interconnected that it is possible to go from one to another by various routes), and (3) empirical extensibility (some of the constructs can be related to empirical observables in such a way that a variety of equivalent empirical definitions can be given to any specific construct) . . . without rules of correspondence to link some of the constructs in a theory to observables, there is no way of ascertaining or testing its empirical consequences."

Which theories or sets of theories best fit these criteria? Which theories would be comprehensive enough to encompass the complexity of the college environment? Which are explicit and not just a mash of fuzzy words? Which measure meaningful and/or comparable aspects of the college environment? Which have been tested empirically? Which have relatively clear and parsimonious constructs? Which have clear internal logic interrelating concepts in orderly ways? Which lead to testable hypotheses?

Applying these questions to analyses of industrial and similar organizational settings, three approaches seem to have unusual promise as bases of theory for understanding the college environment: role theory, organizational psychology, and social ecological analysis.

(1) Role theory. This approach has led to the development of measures and the testing of hypotheses in industrial settings (Katz and Kahn, 1966). It has also been applied to graduate schools (Baird, 1969). It is flexible and covers communication, power and authority, attributes of the person, interpersonal factors, role behavior and personal reactions. Some role-theorists have developed interconnected nets of theoretical propositions based on various assumptions. Many of these propositions can be applied to the college environment

(2) Organizational Psychology has explored a variety of the dimensions of organizations (Likert, 1967; Tagiuri and Litwin, 1968). The range of hard research has been from an examination of the correlates of these dimensions across organizations to laboratory simulations of organizational conditions which test propositions. This approach is not as compact or coherent as the role theory approach, but it includes many concepts which could be applied to certain sectors of the college environment. Studies such as Findikan and Sells' (1966) study of student organizations could serve as prototypes.

(3) Social ecological analysis has generally been applied to communities (Schwirian, 1973) in attempts to understand the effects of urbanization and industrialization. The variables usually studied are demographic, social

organizational, and environmental. The result is often a path analysis of the interrelations of these variables with some criterion of group outcomes (Dogan and Rokkan, 1969). This approach could be used to examine the influence of college environmental dimensions which are related to educational outcomes.

All three of these approaches appear promising at the present time. Existing data could be reanalyzed using their concepts to further examine their usefulness in understanding the college environment.

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